Diseases, Disorders and Injuries

Common Cold

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What is the common cold?

The common cold is an infection of the upper respiratory tract - the nose, nasal passages, throat, and windpipe. There are more than 200 viruses that can cause colds, which can spread rapidly in workplaces, classrooms and homes. The primary family of viruses that cause common colds in adults are the rhinoviruses. There are more than one hundred kinds of rhinoviruses. These are also called "nose viruses", based on a Greek word "rhino" meaning nose. Illnesses of the nose and throat caused by germs are called upper respiratory tract infections.

What are the symptoms of the common cold?

Symptoms usually show up about two days after a person becomes infected. Early signs of a cold are red eyes, a sore throat, sneezing, and a runny nose. Other symptoms that may occur include headache, stuffy nose, watering eyes, hacking cough, chills, muscle aches, and general malaise (ill-feeling) lasting from 2 to 7 days. Some cases may last for two weeks. The common cold may be accompanied by:

- laryngitis (inflammation of the larynx or "voice box")
- tracheitis (inflammation of the membrane lining the trachea or "wind pipe")
- bronchitis (inflammation of the bronchial membranes)
- ear infection (swelling and build-up of fluids in the space behind the eardrum)

- worsening of asthma

The OSH Answers How Do Particulates Enter the Respiratory System? explains more about parts of the respiratory tract.

These inflammations may make one more susceptible to more serious complications, such as

- sinusitis (inflammation of tissues in the sinus) and
- pneumonitis (inflammation of lung tissue))

Can someone be infected with a cold virus and not show symptoms?

Yes, it is even possible to be exposed to cold viruses and not become infected. When people are infected, they can be asymptomatic (i.e., showing no symptoms); this is called a sub-clinical infection since the infection is not causing a disease. Most people with colds show mild symptoms but severe colds can have symptoms of headache, fever, aches and pains all over, stuffy nose and coughing.

How widespread is the common cold?

Common cold infections are so widespread that there can be very few people who escape the infection each year. It has been estimated that adults suffer 2 to 5 colds per year and is one of the leading causes of missed days at work. The viruses are around all year long and are very contagious. They can live for many hours on objects like door handles, telephones, pens, and more. If a healthy person picks up an object covered with the virus and touches their nose, mouth or eyes, they can become infected. Risk factors affecting the chances of getting the cold include age, poor physical health, weakened immune system, smoking, and exposure to crowds.

How are common cold viruses transmitted?

Colds are not very contagious compared to other infectious diseases. Close personal and prolonged contact is necessary for the cold viruses to spread. The viruses must get into the nose where they can infect the nasal membranes. The virus must attach to nasal cells after which the viruses can multiply. Inhaling contaminated droplets produced when someone else coughs or sneezes may be one way to catch a cold.

Cold viruses can remain infective even if they are outside the body for a few hours. You can catch a cold if you handle something that is contaminated with a cold virus and then stick your contaminated finger up your nose or rub your eyes. The cold viruses can reach the nose when you rub your eyes because the virus can be passed down the tear ducts that go from the eyes into the nasal cavities.

Is there a cure for the common cold?

No, there is no cure and no vaccines are currently available. Treating the symptoms with non-prescription medicines may help as does getting plenty of rest and drinking lots of fluids.

Good health habits are important in preventing the spread of the common cold including:

- frequent hand washing with soap and water
- using alcohol-based hand sanitizers when soap and water are not available
- avoiding close contact with sick people
- coughing and sneezing into your elbow or use a tissue (and throw away the tissue immediately)
- avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- strengthening the immune system
- using good hygiene practices, such as cleaning and disinfecting surfaces likely to be contaminated and touched by others, or practicing social distancing (e.g., keeping 1-2 metres between individuals, using teleconferencing or remote work technology, etc.)

Do chills or exposure to cold temperatures cause colds?

In a word - no. Some people may sneeze if their skin is cooled. More people catch colds when the weather temperature is cold than when it is warm outside because they tend to be inside more often and longer. People tend to blame cool temperatures for getting a cold rather than being in closer, prolonged contact with people who have a cold.

Some people associate exposure to the cool air from air conditioners as a cause of colds. Again, it is not the temperature that is the culprit.

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